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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

29 March 1951

Memorandum for the Director of Central Intelligence

Subject: Strategic Importance of Iranian Petroleum to the USSR

Importance of Iranian Aviation Gasoline Refineries

If the USSR were to have access to the output of the Iranian petroleum refinery at Abadan, the weak Soviet position in aviation gasoline would be considerably improved. The USSR's present tight supply situation in aviation gasoline is not sufficiently critical to prevent the initiation of a general war by the USSR. It is, however, a serious limiting factor in the use of military aircraft, particularly in the use of medium and heavy bombers in strategic air operations. This stringency, together with the vulnerability of the petroleum refineries to air attack, makes aviation gasoline production a point of Soviet military weakness.

Soviet accessibility to the entire aviation gasoline capacity of the Abadan refinery would increase the availability of high octane aviation gasoline to the USSR by as much as 75 to 100 percent. Most, or perhaps all, of this aviation gasoline could be moved to the Soviet Union by rail over the line running from the Abadan area to the Caspian Sea. Tanker capacity on the Caspian Sea is sufficient to transship the probable quantities involved to the ports of entry.

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Problems in Transporting Petroleum to the USSR

Although significant amounts of aviation gasoline and limited quantities of other refined products could be transported to the USSR relatively soon after they became accessible, full utilization of Iranian petroleum would be impossible for at least several years. Under both peacetime and wartime conditions there would be a shortage of transportation capacity and, in addition, changes in management would probably bring serious production problems.

The USSR is short of tankers and even though this limitation could be offset in part by purchase and charter, any substantial expansion of the tanker fleet in the near future is unlikely.

The single track rail line which runs from the Abadan area to the Caspian Sea is difficult to maintain and the track is standard gauge as opposed to the broad gauge lines of the USSR. Port facilities on the Caspian Sea at the terminus of the line would have to undergo major repairs and expansion. Even though capacity would be sufficient to move significant quantities of aviation gasoline to the USSR, only a small part of the remaining petroleum output could be moved until rail facilities were expanded. Highway transportation is capable of moving only relatively small amounts.

Probable Soviet Measures to Utilize Iranian Petroleum in Peacetime

If the USSR were to have access to Iranian petroleum under continued peacetime conditions, it would undoubtedly make every effort to expand facilities for transportation. In addition to expanding rail and water facilities, it is also possible that the USSR would build a pipeline. Any of these measures would take at least several years. While transportation facilities were being expanded,

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the USSR could use these resources to add to its domestic supplies of aviation gasoline and, in addition, might ship some refined products to China and the Soviet Far East. If non-Soviet tankers could be chartered, the USSR might also export petroleum to Western Europe in exchange for items of importance to the Soviet bloc. When transportation difficulties were overcome, if there were no serious destruction of facilities, these petroleum resources could eventually add to the availability of Soviet refined products by 50 to 70 percent at current levels.

Value of Iranian Petroleum to the USSR in Wartime

If these petroleum resources become available to the USSR in wartime, the primary Soviet effort would be to acquire aviation gasoline and certain special products, such as lubricants. Transportation facilities would not be sufficient to permit movement of these refined products to the USSR in large quantities. The major threat to Soviet utilization of any of these refined products, including aviation gas, is the extreme vulnerability to sabotage and air attack of the Abadan refinery and the rail facilities connecting Abadan with the USSR. This vulnerability, arising out of the heavy concentration of refining facilities in the Abadan area and the numerous bridges and tunnels on the single track rail line to the Caspian Sea, makes the wartime value of the Iranian petroleum industry extremely doubtful. An air lift effort would only be attempted in an extreme emergency and any attempts at shipping through the Persian Gulf would be subject to naval interdiction.

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